

Research for the Community

Bates Students Learn as they Work Magic for Lewiston and Auburn

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When a fire breaks out in the twin cities of Lewiston and Auburn, Maine, the firefighter response time is just a bit quicker these days, thanks to student research at Bates College. When the alarm sounds, firefighters click on a computer map that tells them the size of the burning structure, the quickest route to the fire, the closest hydrant and whether it can provide enough water.

Before his graduation in 1999, Bates geology student Peter Beeson researched and developed a Geographical Information System (GIS) for firefighters in the two cities. The system also is used to gauge environmental impact of road developments, and for other geographical purposes such as optimum routes for sewerage. Municipal officials say that Beeson's research has saved them nearly \$200,000.

For Beeson, it was a heady experience: "I was learning too much to realize that I was volunteering a lot of time," Beeson said in an interview for the college magazine. "When I offered a suggestion, people would listen and act on what I had to say. It's gratifying, especially for a young student who doesn't know the value of what he knows."

This experience illustrates the mutual advantages that research projects provide colleges and their communities—in this case, Bates College and its community development partner, an initiative of 36 local business, civic and institutional leaders in Lewiston and Auburn called LA Excels.

Recently, Bates and LA Excels were awarded an \$80,000 grant from the national Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education's "Engaging Communities and Campuses" program. Over the next two years, the grant will fund 10 summer Community Research Fellowships. These fellowships will take qualified students into Lewiston and Auburn to undertake research projects identified by the community as essential building blocks of ambitious community development efforts. The research fellows then prepare reports that are put to immediate use by community groups as they plan, finance, and realize community improvement projects.

LA Excels insists that the process be rooted in the community and that citizen involvement characterize any meaningful partnership. The LA Excels agenda is based on two years of community conventions bringing hundreds of residents to planning sessions with the college and LA Excels leadership. The agenda focuses on:

- Strengthening local educational aspirations with special focus on children from birth through age 5.
- Enriching local arts and culture by developing a community arts learning center, a performing arts center and possibly a cultural heritage museum.
- Creating stronger neighborhoods and business districts, initially through development of a series of neighborhood housing projects.
- Creating a greenways system of bicycle and walking trails linking some of the finest amenities of both cities: the Androscoggin River, Lake Auburn and a bird sanctuary in Lewiston.

The Bates Community Research Program is connected to these objectives. Each Community Research Fellow is assigned a community adviser and a Bates College adviser. Fellows work either at Bates or in community offices on their research, and funds are available for travel and other expenses.

Art history and political science major Apostolia Hantzara will spend this summer investigating models of successful community arts centers in college communities similar to Lewiston and Auburn. She plans to concentrate her search on how an arts center can serve as an exciting gathering spot for children, teens, adults and college students. Hantzara says she suspects that bringing together such a diverse group of citizens in the name of creative pursuits can invigorate and unify a community.

The fellows, selected through essay applications, have strong academic and research skills. They are independent thinkers who can work well on their own, but who also are prepared to interact with professionals in community agencies. They are eager to put their liberal arts training to the test in the real world. They are curious about careers in community development, arts administration, land-use planning and city planning. And they recognize the responsibility implicit in the fact that a research project that they complete this summer is likely to have a direct impact on Lewiston-

Auburn's community improvement goals in housing, the arts or greenways development.

The community research fellowships provide \$3,500 stipends to students who work eight to 10 weeks full-time in the summer on one of the community-designed research projects. Each project is linked to specific community development goals, and each research report completed by a fellow contributes essential information for moving Lewiston and Auburn toward a better future.

Bates students last year provided 59,381 hours of service—mostly connected to academic service-learning projects—to 139 nonprofit groups and government agencies, according to a college survey. And Bates has integrated forms of service into its curricula, including creating a center to coordinate and support service that is rooted in academic experiences and expectations—enhancing the contexts for learning. Research is a natural next step in college interaction with its community. The applied research opportunities afforded through the Community Research Program further expand how service and undergraduate academic experience can be connected by enabling students to put their academic work into practice.

Moreover, Bates is able to enhance hands-on learning while addressing community needs. "It is based on the premise that to prepare students for a lifetime of contributions to society, colleges should enable students to connect with the world beyond the campus while still in school," says LA Excels Executive Director Rebecca Conrad.

Many private colleges already provide access to resources and expertise that reaches beyond the community; they bring visibility that reinforces community



Serving. Peter Beeson and other Bates students analyzed the environmental impact of a proposed road near a local bog in Lewiston, Maine. The city manager praised the students for an "absolutely stupendous job."

aspiration; and they contribute committed leadership and energy from students, staff and alumni.

For colleges and communities now engaged as civic entrepreneurs, forming a community-wide strategic partnership can lead to strengthening structures for change, growth and development. For residents of Lewiston and Auburn, the hometown private college's commitment to its "place" and to a genuine community-based partnership, there is already an important result: a palpable attitudinal change, a confidence in the future and an expectation for success.

Donald W. Harward is president of Bates College and chair of LA Excels.

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